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RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 6670
RUEHQH/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 7360
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 4651
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 003829

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CAUCA INDIGENOUS PROTESTS EXPANDING TO NATIONAL MARCH

REF: BOGOTA 3794

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer. Reason: 1.4(b,d)

¶11. (C) Summary: On October 20, the National Organization of Indigenous in Colombia (ONIC) announced plans for over 12,000 indigenous to participate in an eight day march from Popayan to Cali. The march follows a week of indigenous protests in Cauca over human rights and land. The indigenous say they will continue the march to Bogota if President Uribe does not meet with them in Cali. GOC officials fear the disruption of major highways and FARC infiltration of the protests.

Representatives from the U.S., Canadian, Swiss, and Swedish embassies met with indigenous groups and the United Nations in Popayan on October 18 to discuss the situation. President Uribe said the GOC will meet its 1995 commitment to acquire over 15,000 hectare of land for the Paez community, and GOC officials reiterated their willingness to dialogue with the indigenous. The UN believes some indigenous reports of excessive violence by security forces are exaggerated, but remains concerned about possible violence. End Summary.

Indigenous Protests Turn to National March

¶12. (SBU) On October 20, ONIC president Luis Fernando Arias convoked over 12,000 indigenous from Cauca to participate in an eight-day march from Popayan to Cali. Speeches and rallies are planned at rest stops along the route. Protesters' main concerns include land rights, rejection of the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement, repeal of mining and water laws, and the end of Plan Colombia and the GOC's democratic security policy. Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos insisted that the indigenous apologize for attacks against security forces, and pledged to investigate any "external influence and financing" of the protests. Arias said that if President Uribe does not meet the protestors in Cali, the marchers will continue on to Bogota. Teachers union (FECODE) President Senen Nino said one million state workers will stage a 24 hour strike in solidarity with the indigenous and striking sugar cane workers on October 23. UNDP Country Director Barbara Pesce does not believe the march will be violent, but noted the national police's commitment to keep the national highway open.

Delegation of Embassies Meets Indigenous in Popayan

¶3. (SBU) On October 18, representatives from the U.S., Canadian, Swiss, and Swedish embassies visited Popayan (Cauca department) to meet with indigenous leaders involved in the land protests. Father Dario Echeverri, Secretary General of the National Conciliation Commission; UN High Commissioner's Office on Human Rights (UNHCHR); UN Office on the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); UN Development Program (UNDP); UN Children's Fund (UNICEF); the human rights groups Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES); and the Association for Alternative Social Promotion (MINGA) also participated in a three-hour meeting with over 30 indigenous representatives. Indigenous participants included members of the North Cauca Association of Indigenous Councils (ACIN), Committee of the Integration of Colombian Macizo (CIMA), and Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC). Indigenous leaders complained that the GOC was willing to meet with paramilitaries and terrorists but not them. They had no alternative but to engage in social protest. Agriculture Minister Andres Arias, Interior and Justice Minister Fabio Valencia, and Social Protection Minister Diego Palacio tried to meet with indigenous leaders the same day, but the indigenous said they would only meet with President Uribe.

Indigenous Deny Ties to FARC

¶4. (C) The indigenous in Cauca demanded that the GOC honor past agreements on land, respect human and territorial rights, and provide social services. The GOC must also stop labeling anyone opposing it as subversives, terrorists, and FARC sympathizers. The indigenous called for a commission of UN agencies and the Church to mediate and make long term assessments (Note: Father Echeverri told us privately the Church does not plan to intervene in what it sees as a political rather than humanitarian issue. Still, he pledged to continue to urge for a peaceful resolution. End Note.)

¶5. (U) Indigenous leaders said the land issue is important because they do not want to become "slaves to private companies" as has happened to the sugar cane workers. They oppose free trade agreements with the U.S. or other countries that do not address their demands on labor, social, and natural resource rights. The indigenous also called for the creation of an indigenous association that would promote cooperatives as an alternative to contracts with private companies. They also called for the GOC to stop "physical and cultural genocide against indigenous," and sought the creation of a ministerial-level mechanism for dialogue with a clear methodology, process, timetable, and budget.

¶6. (U) Gloria Flores, director of MINGA, said she and other human rights groups appreciated the visit by the four embassies to the region, especially during this turbulent time. She is urging a group of U.S. members of Congress to write a letter to the GOC voicing their concerns about the situation. Flores said MINGA will also raise the Cauca case at the Interamerican Commission on Human Rights meeting in Washington the week of October 27. Flores said the USG should take these human rights considerations into account before providing further funding to the Colombian government and military.

GOC Offers to Purchase Lands, Maintain Dialogue

¶7. (C) Uribe announced on October 18 that the GOC would meet its 1995 commitment to acquire over 15,000 hectares for the Paez indigenous community in Cauca, but made no promises regarding the controversial Japio and Emperatriz fincas (reftel). To date, the GOC has turned over 10,082 hectares, with plans and funds to buy 2,790 more over the next two years. Ministry of Interior and Justice indigenous expert Pedro Santiago told us buying the land would take some times,

a pace unlikely to satisfy the indigenous. Posada said the GOC will continue to dialogue with the indigenous and are planning a national consultative meeting on November 10-11. The GOC supports the right of the indigenous to march, but not when it disrupts major transportation routes and involves violence. He speculated that the FARC could try to infiltrate the march, posing a threat to the protestors themselves.

OCHA Repudiates Reports of Excessive Violence

¶8. (C) OCHA's Head of Office Maria Jose Torres reported that the protests have left 92 indigenous injured, 70 police injured, and one indigenous confirmed dead so far. Both sides made extensive use of tear gas, machetes, and pipe bombs. The indigenous also accused the Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squad of the National Police (ESMAD) of burning down five to eight homes in the La Maria indigenous resguardo. UNDP Country Director Barbara Pesce told us the UN saw no evidence of destruction of homes and considers some of the indigenous allegations of police violence exaggerated. Still, the UN expressed concerns about the GOC's public allegations about indigenous-FARC ties, threats to indigenous leaders, and entrance into the La Maria resguardo. OCHA confirmed that a military official detained and later released by indigenous was found to have in his possession a uniform, radio, and instructions on making bombs.

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